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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the treatment of minority group children in the public schools. Noting that the school's approach to the child's first language may determine where the child is "afforded great opportunity or faced with formidable problems," the author states: "The opportunity comes when the school works to build upon and develop the linguistic and cultural strengths which the child brings to the classroom. The problems occur when the school ignores or attempts to suppress those strengths. "The author then discusses the situation in California, where many Spanish speaking children have been placed in classes for the retarded educable because of their inability to function properly in English. Problems encountered by Negro speakers of non-standard dialects are also discussed. The author sees hope for improvement in the Bilingual Education Act of 1967, but finds reason for continuing concern because the linguistic and cultural characteristics of minority group are still not adequately understood. The author urges the necessity for a "greater understanding of the nature of linguistic and cultural characteristics and the aspirations of the various minority groups in our nation." (FWB)

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THE SCHOOLS AND THE MINORITY CHILD'S LANGUAGE

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In his daily encounters with the schools in our nation, the child from a minority group may be afforded great opportunity or faced with formidable problems. Whether the opportunities outweigh the problems depends in large measure on how the school approaches the minority child's first language. The opportunity comes when the school works to build upon and develop the linguistic and cultural strengths which the child brings to the classroom. The problems occur when the school ignores or attempts to suppress those strengths.

That the schools have not taken advantage of opportunities to strengthen and develop rather than ignore or suppress minority childrens' native competencies is the theme of this paper. The discussion will focus on such educational anomalies as the following: Our educational and governmental institutions spend perhaps a billion dollars each year for foreign language instruction for Anglos, yet our school policies and state laws have effectively prevented some three million bilingual children from becoming adults fluent and literate in their own native foreign language. Influential educators have called for a change in teacher attitudes toward minority children, but at the same time they have put forward unsubstantiated views concerning the language of such children which are likely to adversely affect teacher attitudes. Mexican-American children enter school with a valuable

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knowledge of Spanish language and culture, yet their parents are forced to sue the schools to prevent their assignment to classes for the mentally retarded as a penalty for possessing this special knowledge. United States Office of Education officials call for a "multicultural view of education" and for a "right to read" for all children, this is endorsed by the President of the United States, and yet the Office of Education announces elimination of support for teacher training in the basic studies which might contribute toward achieving these goals.

It is education as it relates to these anomalies, as well as certain hopeful programs,that are discussed in this paper.

Perhaps the most recent and disastrous results of uninformed approaches to the linguistic and cultural resources possessed by minority children have been those documented by the Civil Rights Commission in Texas, and by the courts in California. The documents in both cases concern the referral of minority group children to classes for the mentally retarded. It turns out that "logical" candidates for classes for the mentally retarded in our schools are those children whose linguistic and cultural differences invalidate tests based on white middle class norms, and frustrate the professional abilities and patience of white middle class educators. For some time, disproportionately large numbers of Mexican-American children throughout the southwest have been labeled mentally retarded and placed in special

"educable mentally retarded" (EMR) classes.[1] Thus in California in 1967 over 26% of the children in these classes had Spanish surnames, yet only 13% of the children attending public schools in California had such names. More recently, the rate of placement of Spanish surname children in EMR classes in California has been reported three times higher than for Anglo children; the rate for Negro children is close to four times higher than the Anglo rate.[2] This growth has not been inhibited by the fact that school districts in California are paid roughly double for EMR students on their attendance rolls.[3]

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[1] Studies which document this situation in California include: John Chandler and John Plekos, Spanish-Speaking Pupils Classified as Educable Mentally Retarded (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1969), and Placement of Underachieving Minority Group Children in Special Classes for the Educable Mentally Retarded, A Report to the California State Legislature as Required by House Resolution 444. (Sacramento: California State Department of Instruction, 1970).

[2] A Report on a Conference on Problems of Education of Children in the Inner City (Washington, D.C.: The President's Committee on Mental Retardation, 1969), p.2.

[3] Citizens United for Racial Equality, CURE. 3. 10, June, 1970, p. 1

In the Santa Ana Unified School District in 1969, Mexican-American students made up almost 53% of the enrollment in classes for the mentally retarded, although they comprised only 26% of the total school enrollment. This situation led Mexican-American parents there to take legal action enjoining the school district from, among other things, conducting any mentally retarded classes until those in such classes had been provided "an appropriate test recognizing both the Mexican culture and the American culture."[4] That a group of parents should be forced to seek legal action to obtain recognition by a school system of the legitmacy of linguistic and cultural differences among children is stark testimony to the inefficiency and ethnocentrism of many of our schools.[5]

A study by the Civil Rights Commission demonstrated that the same fate may befall minority group children in the schools of Texas.[6] This

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[4] Summons filed by Rachel Arreola, et al, against the Board of Education, Santa Ana Unified School District, in Superior Court of the State of California for the County of Orange, 1969, p. 15.

[5] on February 5, 1970, U.S. District Judge Robert E. Peckham ruled that henceforth school officials in California would be required to, among other things, have prepared an IQ test normed to the California Spanish-speaking child population and that such children will be tested in both Spanish and English and will be allowed to respond in either language.

[6] Staff Report, A Study of Equality of Educational Opportunity for Mexican-Americans in Nine School Districts of the San Antonia Area (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1969), pp. 34-35.

report confirmed that Mexican-American children are sometimes placed in classes for the mentally retarded merely because their language happens to be different from that of the majority culture. To gauge the effect of such an approach on their education one has but to look at the drop-out rates for Mexican-American students as compared with those of Anglos.

These are not isolated incidents. It is enough of a national problem that the President's Committee on Mental Retardation was moved to note recently that we now have in our schools what may be called a 6-hour mental retardate--classified as mentally retarded while in school solely on the basis of an invalid IQ score. The consensus of a recent conference called by that committee was that "many children now labeled retarded are 'six hour retardates' who are successfully coping with their environment everywhere except for the six hours per day in the classroom."[7]

Perhaps the most absurd aspect of such a tragic educational practice is that is destroys rather than develops in many of these children the very foreign language competencies that our schools, colleges, and government spend perhaps a billion dollars a year to develop in others.[8] These institutions strive year after year to teach foreign languages to government agents, Anglo pupils, and college students. At the same time our schools are penalizing the three million or so children who come to school with considerable competence in those same foreign languages. They say to the child in effect, "You speak a foreign language, your English isn't very good, there must be something wrong with you. We will put you in a class for the mentally retarded to get you straightened out."

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[7] A Report on a Conference..., p.4.

[8] For an expansion on this theme and for an effective argument in favor of bilingual education, see A. Bruce Gaarder, "Statement Before the Special Subcommittee on Bilingual Education, United States Senate," reprinted in TESOL Newsletter, II, 1 and 2, January/March, 1968. The full text of the Bilingual Education Act is reprinted in this same issue of the Newsletter.

The situation is not entirely without its brighter aspects. One hopeful event was the passage by the Congress of the Bilingual Education Act in 1967. In enacting this legislation the Congress (wittingly or unwittingly) was providing official endorsement of the concept of cultural pluralism, of the idea that it might just be helpful to develop the child's skills and concepts in his first language even if this happens to be something other than English. At the same time, of course, such children will be learning English as a second language. And at least some states, including New York and New Mexico have recently passed laws which for the first time enable schools to legally conduct bilingual education programs.[9]

If children can be branded mentally retarded because they speak a distinctive world language with a rich literary heritage, it is not suprising that misjudgements are made about the ability of children who speak a nonstandard variety of English -- a variety which may be only subtly distinct from standard English. Roger Shuy's survey of teacher opinions about the language of black children clearly reveals such misconceptions.[10]

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[9] For a comprehensive survey of the history and impact of federal and state laws regulating the status of English and minority languages in the United States see Arnold Leibowitz, "English Literacy: Legal Sanction for Discrimination," Notre Dame Lawyer, 45, 1, Fall 1969, pp. 7-67.

[10] Roger Shuy, Walter Wolfram, and William Riley, Linguistic Correlates of Social Stratification in Detroit Speech, Cooperative Research Project No. 6-1347, Part IV (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, 1967), pp. 2-4.

The teachers surveyed felt that such children "used monosyllables and failed to speak in sentences", that they were "language starved," or that they "have a vocabulary of only a hundred words." Their language has been characterized as "deviant", "irregular", "unsystematic", and "illogical." Some educators have urged that such children be treated "as if they have no language at all." Others have asked that teachers "demand that black children discard their substandard dialect."

Yet the same educators who brand the black child's language in this manner will call for a change in teacher expectations and attitudes with regard to minority children. Believe in the capacities and abilities of your children, they would say, and they will be more likely to succeed. To further bolster their plea for a positive attitude, they might point to the studies which have demonstrated the correlation of higher teacher expectations with higher pupil achievement.[11] But there is a crucial factor which cannot be overlooked here: An important criterion we use in developing expectations about people is our perception of the way they talk. The fact that speech has little relation to intelligence does not inhibit people from making judgements about intelligence on that basis. A recent study by Wallace Lambert and other clearly demonstrates a correlation between teacher perception of childrens' speech and their expectations for those children, including judgements about their intelligence.[12]

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[11] Lenore Jacobson and Robert Rosenthal, "Self-Fulfilling Prophesies in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations as Unintended Determinates of Pupils' Intellectual Achievement," Scientific American, 218, 4, April, 1968, pp. 20-25.

[12] Wallace Lambert, C. Seligman, and C. Tucker, "Teachers' Attitudes and Pupils' Performance", McGill University, unpublished paper, 1970.

Children whose speech was felt to be "poorer" were characterized by the teachers in this study as "less intelligent", "less friendly", and "less sensitive." We might expect then, that those who brand the minority child's language as "illogical", "unsystematic", or "deviant" are espousing views that are not only inaccurate,[13] but are also likely to be used by teachers and others as the basis for falsely judging such children as, among other things "less intelligent." Teacher expectations for such children will consequently be lowered, and we can anticipate this in turn will adversely affect pupil performance.

The school conditions and teacher attitudes noted above do not make for the efficient use of the funds available for the education of minority children. Much of the inefficiency can be traced to the mistreatment of the linguistic and cultural strengths that the minority child brings to the classroom. And this inefficiency can be very expensive in terms of federal funds as well as damaged children. Although only $7.50 of each $1,000 in the federal budget is requested this year for elementary and secondary education[14] (over $375 of each $1,000 goes for military defense), a single program of federal aid to low-income family children will provide roughly one billion dollars to schools for a variety of educational services.[15]

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[13] Such views have been effectively refuted by William Labov in The Study of Non-Standard English (Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1970) pp. 46-50.

[14] Mike Mansfield, "The Nation's Economy and the Congress", The Congressional Record-Senate, June 25, 1970, pp. S9788-S9790

[15] Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

Most of the 22,000 projects supported annually under this program deal with children whose first language or dialect is other than standard English. But since this money goes directly to the schools which have failed such children in the past, (witness normal Mexican-American children in classes for the mentally retarded), there is little reason to expect dramatic achievements in these projects. The available evidence indicates this skepticism is justified.

A study of the results of the first year (school year 1966-1967) of the one billion dollar Title I program reported a slight decline in average pupil achievement in the sample projects receiving Title I funds.[16] Since reading scores were used as measures of achievement in this study, it is likely that a failure to appreciate the nature of linguistic characteristics of the minority children in these projects played a major role in the poor achievement reported. If the latest reports on how these programs are faring are any indication of the extent to which linguistic differences are being appreciated in the schools, there is reason for continued concern. A recent presidential message to Congress on education noted that Title I projects (still funded annually at the billion dollar level) have stressed the teaching of reading,[17] but before-and-after tests suggest only 19% of the

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[16] TEMPO, General Electric Company, Analysis of Compensatory Education in Five School Districts, Final Report, Contract No. OEC-0-8-080462-3513, 1968, p. 30.

[17] "President's Message to the Congress on Educational Reform", (Washington, D.C.: Office of the White House Press Secretary, March 3, 1970).

children in such programs improve their reading significantly: 13% appear to fall behind more than expected; and more than two-thirds of the children remain unaffected -- that is, they continue to fall behind. This is not to say that the projects assessed are without value. But it does suggest that they could be made more effective. Again, since reading was the skill evaluated, it might be safe to assume that an important reason for the lack of notable success in these projects was misunderstanding and mistreatment of the linguistic and cultural characteristics of minority group children.

These studies must have some meaning for us as teachers of English, whether we teach it as a first or a second language. Clearly we must heed the resolutions of NCTE, MLA, and TESOL, all passed within the last year, and all calling for greater understanding of the nature of linguistic and cultural characteristics and the aspirations of the various minority groups in our nation. For future teachers, such an understanding can be developed by teacher education programs which place increased emphasis upon cultural anthropology, history of minority groups, foreign languages, linguistics, and other subject matter areas directly related to minority children.

If our society could believe, and if our schools would teach, that diversity is not to be feared or suspected, but valued and enjoyed, we would be well on the way to solving some critical national-problems, including those problems faced daily by minority children in our schools.